

Topic: **Integration of non-English speakers and being bilingual in the USA today**

C: Hi, Maria. So lovely to see you again.

M: You too, Carla. How are you doing?

C: Good. I'm good. You know, I've been thinking a lot about the conversation we had last time and you talked about being Italian-American in the U.S. And I kept thinking, I wonder how that works if you don't speak the language, how you become integrated in the society.

M: Today?

C: Yeah.

M: I think there's people that aren't integrated in the society, especially let's say you go to Chinatown. And you will have the elderly who don't need to speak English because they live in Chinatown. Everyone speaks Chinese. So you can go to restaurants or grocery stores. All your friends speak Chinese. And perhaps you don't have work. So you're not out in the community. Your family speaks Chinese. That's very common where you'll find older immigrants who don't speak English at all. And then the second generation is bilingual. They speak both and they walk in both cultures. And then third generation can possibly lose that language. It just depends.

C: Because your parents speak the country's language, there is no need for talking the language. Yeah, I understand.

M: So it just depends. I mean, English, although we have 350 languages, English is still dominant. And that's because it's the language of education. Now, we do have bilingual schools. They're very, very common. Not as common as we would like, but they are. So depending where you live, you could have a bilingual school that's Vietnamese and English or Spanish and English or Russian and English. It just depends on the neighborhood you're in. But the funding for these schools is not always available as well and as strongly as just English only schools.

C: I understand.

M: So English is still dominant, which is too bad in a country with so many languages that we can't have at least one more language that would be dominant.

C: I always thought that was the strength of the USA, that there is one common language. Because then, okay, you learn this one common language. You can keep your, like, whatever languages you have in your baggage and you just learn this one common language and you can talk to everyone. I kind of imagined it, you know, like in the Tolkien universe, you have this Common language. That they speak and then they have like their own. That's a little bit what the USA is like.

M: It is. But the problem we're finding is that when kids go to school, so let's say I go to school speaking Spanish and then and I go at five. So my Spanish is not fully developed. But right then at five years old, they're going to take away my Spanish and teach me English. Then I'm not coming out fully developed as a bilingual. And so we're trying to change that where we want to maintain the bilingualism of people because it's so valuable. So you'll see kids come in with a first language, they forget it, and then they go to university and try to learn it again. And we call them heritage speakers. So we have a lot of classes for heritage speakers right now. They can maybe speak Spanish, street Spanish, but don't write it and can't do it academically. Where we want people to be strong in both languages. And that's happening a lot with First Nation and Native American languages. Now we are trying to preserve them because we got rid of so much of them. So now you have a lot of bilingual

schools because they're desperately trying to preserve Navajo for example and not let English take it over. So that's the problem.

C: Yeah, that's a really good idea because you accommodate the people's identity, but at the same time, you give them a chance to learn the one common language. That's really nice. How does that work with the curriculum?

M: So that's where bilingual schools come in. Dual language schools are called in both languages. Otherwise, we're failing at that. We are literally erasing languages, not because we want to, but because they're learning only in English. And as a kid, you want to fit in. So a lot of us encourage the parents to keep speaking the first language with the child so they don't lose it. But again, while the child is rising academically in English, they're not rising academically in their first language. They just have a spoken first language. I think we're stronger if we have strong bilingual people. I mean, you look at Europe, most people are bilingual.

C: Yeah, I actually think I read somewhere that most people in the world are bilingual. But also I see what you have described actually in myself. Because I moved to Norway, but I did my... So university studies in Norway. So I have never worked in my profession as a teacher in my native country. And there is a whole part of that language that I have never had to use. And I... Yeah, like speaking about teaching, speaking about, yeah, whatever is connected to my profession. I feel much more comfortable doing that in Norwegian or English than doing that in Czech.

M: That's so interesting.

C: And it's because I've never been in that environment.

M: You don't have the academic Czech vocabulary.

C: Exactly. Exactly. So I completely understand how... And when you start your education and you only do it in English, you kind of lose the whole part of your native language that you could have if you... That's amazing that, yeah, that you're doing this with bilingual schools.

M: Yeah, but it's not enough. It's not enough schools. I mean, we're a huge country and funding for education is low. So it's hard to find teachers.

C: I mean, it's difficult to be perfect, but it's really nice that the initiative is there.

M: For some people. Some people would like to have English only. Again, America. Huge country, different perspectives. Different opinions. Different opinions. What I'm saying doesn't count for all Americans.

C: People are different, have different experiences and think differently.

M: They do.

C: So this is our last chat about the US, thank you so much for taking the time to tell me all this, it has been fascinating and I have learned so much through these conversations! Thank you!

M: I really enjoy talking to you, Carla. Thank you so much for the opportunity.

C: Thank you!